DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 131 EA 023 523

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TITLE Business-Education Collaboration: An Old Relationship in New Times.
INSTITUTION National School Boards Association, Alexandria, VA.
PUB DATE Sep 91
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
JOURNAL CIT Updating School Policies; v22 n7 p1-4 Sep 1991

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Accountability; *Board of Education Role; *Cooperation; Cooperative Programs; *Corporate Support; Educational Objectives; Elementary Secondary Education; Instructional Innovation; *Policy Formation; Public Schools; School Based Management; *School Business Relationship; School Restructuring
IDENTIFIERS *Partnerships in Education

ABSTRACT

Both business and education leaders have come to view their alliance as the way to educate America's youth to meet society's needs. Because successful businesses are flexible and adaptable, business leaders can work with school boards in changes promoted by the current school reform movement. Board members need to work with business to identify realistic and effective strategies. Eight basic steps in establishing a working and workable coalition are as follows: (1) choose a coalition structure; (2) create a vision; (3) develop a plan of action; (4) build trust; (5) define the roles and include all important players; (6) establish common ground; (7) cultivate patience and maintain support; and (8) access progress. Four publications are listed for other perspectives and program suggestions for business-education partnerships. (MLF)

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ED 339131

Updating SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES
Volume 22/Number 7 /September 1991
A component of the National Education Policy Network of the National School Boards Association provided to NSBA Direct Affiliates and NEPN subscribers

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Business-Education Collaboration: an old relationship in new times

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

by Karen Powe

"It is in the schools that this nation has chosen to pursue enlightened ends for all its people. And this is where the future of America will be won or lost."

—The Business Roundtable Participation Guide: A Primer for Education on Business

The 1990s are touted by many as the decade of change and collaboration. All around us, involving us to greater or lesser degrees, are alliances, coalitions, and joint committees. Prominent among the groups formed with mutual interests are the Business Roundtables and business-education initiatives, many of which have existed for years. In fact, business-education partnership is an old subject. Corporate America has been investing in education for decades, and educators have been actively calling on the business community for support throughout the 1900s. While the intensity and effectiveness of the relationship between the two has ebbed and flowed over the years, it has never ceased. Today the alliance of the economic and education sectors of society has assumed a critical importance in America's future and in the lives of education policymakers and their charges, public school students.

The complexity of the educational and societal issues facing public schools today requires a united approach to meet the needs of our children and our communities. Decreasing numbers of parents with school-age children, increasing health and social problems impacting on all public institutions, and declining resources at all levels of government have resulted in escalating interest in mutually beneficial business-education partnerships. Both business and education leaders have come to view their alliance as the most likely means to achieve a shared end: an educated citizenry that contributes to the economic and social health of the nation.

Re-thinking Our Roles

The changing times have affected educators' and business people's perceptions of one another and their intertwining roles. Corporate leaders increasingly view the schools — the only public institution with near-universal contact with young citizens — as a major vehicle for social change. "Schools are the only public institution which touch nearly every child in America. In most cases, children spend more time in school than they spend interacting with any other institution or individual, including members of their own families. Because of this, school seems to be the logical location for ensuring that the...needs of children are met." (**The Business Roundtable Participation Guide: A Primer for Education on Business**, p. 61.)

We know that the well-being of American society depends on providing quality education, equitable and rewarding employment opportunities, adequate health care and housing, and an optimal social environment. Business believes its role in helping us attain that state of well-being is vital. Numerous surveys conducted over the past two decades by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, National Alliance of Business, and the Committee on Economic Development indicate that communities showing the least amount of progress in dealing with their social problems, including education, also had the smallest degree of business involvement. Ninety-six percent of the Fortune 500 companies surveyed said that they were doing something to help education meet the challenges it faces, based on a 1989 study by Fortune Magazine and AllState Insurance Company.

Likewise, educators view the business community with increasing respect and optimism, seeing it as one of the few segments of society with the interest and influence needed to be an effective partner in undertaking the task of educating America's youth to meet society's needs. You, as Board members, know there are many benefits to be realised from partnerships between education and business, including increased support for education.

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Realizing the Benefits

For business, the prospect of hiring more knowledgable and skilled employees is the primary benefit. The benefits for education are not always as clear, but they are numerous. In addition to the support that derives from a partnership, business can also provide help to education in making school seem more relevant to students. How often have we heard "Why do I need to learn this? I'm never going to use this," be it about algebra, geography, history, or art. Business involvement can illustrate the inter-relationship between learning and earning a living. Many classes will have a lot more meaning to students when they see that area of knowledge applied to "real life."

Business can also be a strong advocate for quality education and can support that advocacy with their resources (people, finances, and facilities), making them available to meet student needs, for example, through programs that allow access to equipment or by providing scholarships. And business can enhance the importance of education by stressing that school is the student's "business," backing up their statements with company personnel policies that require high school graduation checks and by agreeing not to hire non-graduates. The ultimate benefit of business-education collaboration is the example to students that is provided by a joint undertaking by two very different groups which have identified a mutual goal — quality education for all public school children.

Removing the Barriers

In order to realise these advantages, we need to remove some of the barriers to collaboration that continue to exist. Despite all the shared benefits of building coalitions, the attitudes of business and education remain guarded as to how successful different kinds of partnerships can be. Developing an effective working relationship will require mutual listening and understanding.

Business needs a better understanding of how educational governance works. Specifically, suggests NSBA Executive Director Thomas A. Shannon, "business people should eschew the flawed approach of searching for a magic nationwide solution [to educational problems]....[and of applying] to schools everywhere the organizational structure based on current...thinking of business administrative theorists....And [the business community] should view skeptically the advice of people who have never spent a day engaged in the active rough-and-tumble, democratic, intensely human process of school governance or administration." ("How Business Could Really Help the Schools," *School Board News*, November 6, 1990.)

Education leaders have an increasing responsibility to help business understand the differences between the two systems, and to identify the ways in which effective cooperation can take place. In the area of school restructuring, an issue of great national interest at present, we have an example of the differences that need to be addressed. When business realizes that it is not responding to consumer demands, it changes. Successful businesses are flexible and adaptable, changing the products they deliver, how they are organized, who does what and how. Corporations reduce hierarchies, move people to different positions, decentralize decision making and financial responsibility, and develop new methods of accountability. Because business has extensive, recent experience in restructuring, business leaders have become enthusiastic and vocal promoters of sweeping reform measures in public education.

Recognizing the Differences

But restructuring is different, and far more difficult, in education. Education is not, by nature, market-driven, and its "bottom line"—knowledgable, skilled, healthy and productive citizens—cannot be measured by dollars spent per pupil or standardized test scores. Education's results can only be seen after many years and are subject to multiple outside influences. Restructuring in education does not mean creating a leaner, meaner operation. It means looking for better ways to provide quality and equity in educational opportunity. It means careful, considered change because educators are literally handling the lives of our children.

Consider just three of the changes promoted by the current school reform movement:

- Revision of the system of accountability—

  First we have to determine what outcomes we *really* want and how we are going to measure those outcomes. Using multiple choice tests to track student achievement will not encourage the development of the thinking and analytical skills that business says it needs for the Workforce 2000.

- Site-based management—

  Local schools will not necessarily work any better if we simply make a different group of people responsible for enforcing rules, particularly if we do not provide them with training in school governance and/or give them the authority to change curriculum or instruction, or to control budgets.

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- Improvement of instructional methods—

  Teaching techniques, no matter how modern or enlightened, will continue to be overwhelmed by the increasing numbers of children who come to school with health and social problems unless we develop the means for addressing the needs of the whole child.

All this is not to say that the task is beyond us, but rather that school Board members will need to work with business to identify realistic and effective strategies and form a united offensive. Suggesting some "can do's" to business is a vital step. Companies can, for example, encourage community participation in education by persuading their employees to stand for school Board election and volunteering time in their schools, by adopting personnel policies that provide flexible and supportive work schedules, and by recognizing employees' service to education as part of regular management development or performance appraisal procedures. Business leaders can speak out in favor of public schools, and be proactive in the collaboration of industry and education.

An Agenda for Business

Business is also an integral part of the human resource system and should be involved in defining the knowledge, skills and behaviors needed in the workplace and in establishing school-to-work transition processes. Business needs to state what it expects of graduates, and offer assistance in developing the strategic plans for meeting those expectations. Additionally, business has critical resources to offer — people, facilities, contacts, and revenues. Beyond its ability to provide resources and support, business has credibility, since there is a widely-held belief that business would not be involved if the issue was not important. Corporate America can use its credibility, within the political, economic, and social climate of the 1990s, to play a broader, more substantive role in education. To obtain support for a well-educated work force, upon which America's economy depends, business can focus more attention on the political arena where decisions are made regarding education funding, priorities and programs.

Education-business partnerships need to make their impact felt at City Hall, in state capitols, and in Washington,D.C. by providing lobbyists who speak up for education, supporting political candidates who will vote for increased funding for public education, promoting good schools with good libraries and teachers, building coalitions to develop improved teacher training, higher salaries, higher standards for students and teachers, and special programs to meet increasing special needs.

An expanded role for business in education has implications for education policymakers, and requires thought about and planning for the future of the American education system. In the words of Yogi Berra, "You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there." There are many ways in which education and business can interact, and all need to be considered in light of current or potential school Board policies. Potential areas for business involvement in education include the following:

- classroom presentations by business people;
- support of student activities;
- mentoring relationships;
- teacher exchange programs;
- assistance with setting standards and goals;
- staff development through seminars, company training programs, and/or summer employment;
- management consultation concerning equipment purchases, budget planning, personnel management, and development of food services, transportation and maintenance systems;
- technological assistance in determining how technology can best be used in school settings, and by supporting efforts to obtain equipment and training;
- support for school bond initiatives; and
- development of broader business representation on school boards.

In general, both education and business have the same basic objectives for graduates: English literacy; writing skills; math, science and computer literacy; development of higher-level thinking skills; and problem-solving abilities. Collaboration can also strengthen the professional standing of teachers and improve morale by affirming the importance of public education. Indeed, raising awareness of the importance of public education and expressing confidence in the viability of the education system should be a major goal of education-business collaboration.

A Plan for Policymakers

Ultimately, the school Board is responsible for making the decision about the importance of business-education collaboration in each community, initiating the action for planning that collaboration, identifying the need for supporting policies. Many school districts have developed policies that address the school-business relationship.

Just like policy development for any issue, the background work required in determining collaboration policies is the first and most critical step. The process begins with needs assessment, broad consultation within the community, discussion of goals and objectives of a collaborative venture, and requirements for a policy. There are eight basic steps in establishing a working and workable coalition. You will recognize them; they are, in many ways, a mirror of the policymaking process.

STEP 1: Choose a Coalition Structure

Who should be involved in your business-education collaboration and why? Should it be limited to business people and education leaders, or do you want to involve parents, community

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leaders, and others? The make-up of the coalition will have an impact on its vision, plan of action, and ability to progress.

STEP 2: Create a Vision

Based on a needs assessment and/or management audit, you will want to spell out, at least in general terms, where you want to go. Remember Yogi Berra's advice. This is a broad statement and should be, as the phrase implies, visionary. At the same time, it is well to consider the caution of General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who says, "Be careful what you ask for. You might get it."

STEP 3: Develop a Plan of Action

This is a hard step. Members of the coalition need to agree on the desired results from the beginning. The key is to set realistic goals that fit the existing situation. Both short-terms goals, needed as checkpoints and as the vehicles to build support for your undertakings, and long-term goals, which are realized so much more slowly and need to be supported by the interim successes, are necessary. You may decide not to publicize all your goals initially, but you will want to discuss all the issues and concerns that arise within the collaborating group.

STEP 4: Build Trust

Everyone needs to agree from the outset to be as open as possible. Educators need to know what the business agenda is; what industry hopes to gain from the cooperative venture, and why business is involved. Business needs to understand what is happening in education; what educators need, what opportunities and constraints for change exist within the current system. Trusting each other will be the foundation of your success.

STEP 5: Define the Roles and Include All Important Players

This step is an extension of setting the coalition structure. Identify who wants to/should be involved and how each group can be a contributor to the collaboration goals.

Business can offer training and management experience, market resources, technology, expertise in planning, finance and administration, and political influence. Depending on the goals and objectives you establish, other critical players might be community leaders, parents, teachers unions, health and social service providers, religious leaders, city council representatives, and state legislators.

STEP 6: Establish Common Ground

Does everyone want the same results? While the details of each person's or group's agenda may include different objectives, the overall goals sought should be the same. Everyone needs to be headed in the same direction and needs to be able to reach consensus about the desirability of the long-term results outlined in your plan of action.

Whether the goals include higher student math scores or increased funding for public education, all the collaborators must share the goals and agree on the methods for achieving them. Sending mixed messages will only serve to negate your hard work.

STEP 7: Cultivate Patience and Maintain Support

This is probably the hardest step. Be prepared for temporary set-backs, particularly if your goals involve issues such as raising test scores. Remember to include or, at least, be aware of the multiple groups involved in education — teachers unions, parent groups and government, to name a few. Rotate your coalition leadership, giving everyone visibility and a public role to play. And constantly remind yourselves that true collaboration is often difficult and achieving change is a lengthy process.

STEP 8: Assess Progress

It is easy to become so involved in the hard work of planning that you forget to look at what your planning has produced. Progress in business-education ventures is not just limited to educational programs, but extends to the achievements of coalition-building itself and the involvement in and support of the community for your efforts. Share your progress with everyone — those not directly involved may not be able to see as clearly as you do what has been achieved. And, remember, not meeting your goals does not mean your collaboration has failed; it may be time to redefine what you want and the means to get there.

In the end, we are all seeking the same thing — and perhaps this is our common ground: An equitable, quality education for all our citizens that helps them in leading productive, fulfilling and healthy lives. That is certainly the goal of school Board members. But you cannot do it alone. In our pluralistic and multicultural society, no single group has the resources or the power to change all that needs changing and do all that needs doing to provide the "good life" for our children. School boards, however, can provide the leadership to promote success. Coalitions formed with long-range goals, multifaceted leadership and commitment to public discussion have the greatest chance to create the environment that leads to the changes and success we want. ■

For more information:

If your Board is considering business-education partnerships, you may want to refer to the following publications for other perspectives and program suggestions.

- Berryman, Sue, E., **"The Economy and Education: Many Miles to Go,"** National Center on Education and the Economy, Teachers College, Columbia University, March 1987.
- Council for Aid to Education, **Business and the Schools: A Guide to Effective Programs**, 1989.
- Levine, Marsha and Trachtman, Roberta, editors, **American Business and The Public School**, Committee for Economic Development, Teachers College Press, 1988.
- Timpane, P.Michael and Miller McNeill, Laurie, **Business Impact on Education and Child Development Reform**, Committee for Economic Development, 1991.